Censorship of sexually explicit materials in Australia: what do consumers of pornography have to say about it?

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Abstract

This article attempts to bring a new set of voices into public debates about censorship in Australia—those of consumers of pornography. Forty six consumers—chosen to provide the most diverse range of voices across gender, age, sexuality, income, place of residence and State/Territory—were interviewed in detail. Interviewees consistently distinguished between beneficial and harmful pornography. The main issue was consent; with child pornography, bestiality and violent pornography being singled out for condemnation. The interviewees noted that public debates about pornography in Australia tend to favour conservative religious positions. All interviewees agreed that censorship was necessary; they particularly focussed on the need to keep sexually explicit materials away from children. They evinced a strong distrust of politicians and bureaucrats, and mostly presented a classical liberal line. Several of the consumers had children of their own: all of these interviewees argued that their children should not see sexually explicit material and had strategies in place to ensure that their own did not.

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The question of censorship of sexually explicit materials in Australia continues to generate lively public debate. For example, the suggestion by Clive Hamilton of the Australia Institute, in August 2004, that the government should move to censor sexually explicit materials online sparked the latest public exchange about this issue (Symons, 2004; Hamilton, 2004).

A healthy public sphere allows for a range of voices to contribute to the formation of a public will, and thus to inform the generation of public policy. In the debate about Hamilton's proposal, the voices that were put forward were typical of those heard in debates about pornography and censorship: religious figures (Pell, 2004); concerned parents (Loane, 2004); politicians (Petrusma, 2004); and people who claim not to consume pornography (Perrottet, 2004).

In this debate, as in most public debates about censorship of sexually explicit materials, the voices of one set of experts have been systematically excluded from consideration: those of Australians who use sexually explicit materials as part of their everyday lives. According to some surveys, these consumers constitute up to 33% of the adult population of the country (Roy Morgan, 1999: 11)—and yet we don't hear their point of view being presented in public debates about censorship; and we rarely draw on their expertise in understanding these issues. They are condemned (Pell, 2004b), pitied (Shanahan, 2004), and even spoken for (Hamilton, quoted in Symons, 2004b: 4) in public debates—but their point of view is kept out.

In order to help address this gap, we conducted detailed interviews with forty six consumers of pornography from around Australia. The interviewees were accessed through an initial survey that was administered to over 1000 consumers. This survey was distributed in two ways. Firstly, we wanted to access viewers of pornographic videos and DVDs. In order to do this we inserted 5000 hard copies of the survey within a catalogue of pornographic material which is distributed by mail order company Axis entertainment in Australia. Because of the unusual nature of censorship laws in Australia (it is legal to *buy* pornography in every State and Territory in the country, but illegal to *sell* it in any State—it can only be sold in the two Territories,

Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory), mail-order distributors of pornography in Australia have a wide reach among pornography consumers around the country. These surveys were sent out in August 2003. 367 valid responses were received (7.3% response rate). It should be noted that this is a low response rate. This is perhaps to be expected in a public context in which users of pornography are sometimes vilified as being dangerous or criminal.

In order to allow for the possibility that there may also be consumers of pornography in Australia who are not comfortable putting their name on the mailing list of an adult company—or who simply choose not to, for reasons including ease of access to pornographic material through alternative routes such as the Internet—we also administered the survey on the Internet. The survey instrument (which was the same as that used in the catalogues) was placed online (http://www.understandingpornography.info) on the 2 June 2003 and remained accessible until the 29 October 2003. In order to gain access to the widest possible population of pornographic consumers myself and my two colleagues on this project—Kath Albury and Catharine Lumby, both of the University of Sydney—advertised the survey in a number of different media, including radio, newspapers and magazines, live events such as debates and on Internet lists. 656 valid responses were received from the Internet (after they had been checked for duplicate responses, completeness, internal consistency and multiple responses from single IP addresses), for a total of 1023 responses from consumers of pornography[1]. For more details about the methodology of the survey, see McKee, 2005.

The survey was anonymous, but at the end we invited participants to provide us with their names and contact details if they wanted to be interviewed in more detail for the project. 329 respondents provided their contact details (31.9% of those completing the hard copy of the survey and 32.3% of Internet respondents). We then chose and interviewed forty six of these consumers—twenty six male and twenty female, aged from eighteen to eighty-four, across a range of income brackets, sexualities, urban/rural situations, and every State and Territory in the country (these cover the main demographic categories that have been found to be related to pornography consumption—see Smith et al., 2003: 103). In choosing the interviewees, we aimed not for a *representative* sample of all pornography users in Australia; but for an *illustrative* one. We wanted to ensure that the widest possible range of voices was

heard and so identified respondents from a range of demographic groups[2]. Appendix 2 provides demographic details for each of the interviewees; this can be cross-referenced with the numbers given in the body of this article. The interviews, each lasting about an hour, were conducted at a place of the interviewees' choosing. They were semi-structured, following the interview schedule supplied in Appendix 1.

We then had to decide how to analyse the data provided by the interviewees. A key decision was to treat the interviewees as reasonable and informed sources of information. This is a controversial decision. Some commentators have suggested that the consumption of pornography is, in itself, a sign of mental weakness—such as addiction—which would suggest that we should thus not listen to what pornography consumers say about the topic ('Lust junkies: 2004). However, this position is a moral rather than a scientific one. It tautologically assumes that the act of consuming pornography is, in itself, a symptom of mental illness. We must remember that there is no evidence suggesting that the consumption of pornography is linked to any recognised form of mental illness. There is thus no scientific reason to treat the interviewees—or, as mentioned above, the 33% of the adult population who consume adult materials—as being any less reasonable or informed sources of information than any other group of interviewees.

The second key decision, following on from this, was to attempt in the analysis to present what the interviewees themselves said, rather than to look for hidden, or subconscious meanings that they themselves would not be aware of[3].

Thirdly, in the analysis, I looked for two different kinds of information. On the one hand, I sought out the most common positions and ways of thinking about pornography presented by the consumers (what academics call 'dominant discourses'); on the other, I looked for the most original and interesting points that they made about the topic[4].

Of course I am not making the naïve claim that I am simply letting the interviewees speak for themselves. There is a strong analytical component involved in analysing this material—a quarter of a million words of interviews have been edited down to 5000 words. I made decisions about which comments were the most interesting, the limits of what would count as 'making the same point', the categories into which they should be organised and so on. But for those readers who are concerned that the

article simply gives users of pornography the chance to present their position without critiquing them, or analysing them against external representations, it is worth emphasising—that is the point of the work. This expertise has not previously been presented in the public debate, and this paper is an attempt to do so.

Distinguishing between harmful and beneficent porn

One of the problems with excluding the voices of users of pornography from the public sphere is that we rarely get to hear about the distinctions that they make between what is good, healthy pornography, and what is bad, dangerous pornography. Newspaper articles describe the range of pornography available, from 'good, healthy erotica' to 'rape, incest, coprophilia and bestiality' (Hamilton, 2004; see also Loane, 2004), as though consumers (particularly young consumers) will be unable to distinguish between the good and the bad.

However, one theme that emerges strongly from these interviews is that consumers of pornography have their own ethical systems for judging what is healthy pornography, and what is harmful; and that these systems are remarkably similar to those used in public debate by non-consumers.

We didn't ask interviewees specifically if they thought that some kinds of pornography were harmful: however, many of them wanted to raise this point for themselves. This suggests it was something they felt strongly about. In response to the questions: 'Do you think that pornography is a problem in our society?', and 'Do you think that it should be restricted?', many of the interviewees spontaneously raised the distinction between beneficial and harmful pornography. Their comments on this issue were not framed as personal stories, as their responses to some other questions in the interviews were, but as abstract social thinking. Most of the interviewees took a similar line, mentioning some or all of child pornography, violence and bestiality as being unacceptable—a problem, and needing restrictions. These positions were presented as being commonsense, what everybody—including consumers of pornography—knows.

In describing healthy pornography, several consumers used the terms 'consenting' or 'consensual' (1; also 2, 8, 10, 19, 23, 29, 30, 38, 44). The centrality of consensuality is the first common way of thinking about pornography—or 'dominant discourse'—

presented by these consumers of the genre. Some commentators have argued that the idea of 'consent' is used too easily in debates about pornography, and that the term is not as simple as it seems (Scruton, 2004). Some of the interviewees demonstrated that they had given this issue serious consideration. Two of them pointed out that the use of drugs needed to be taken into account in thinking about consent. As one woman put it, she approves of: 'ethical pornography … where women participate willingly … the companies that are run by women that say women have been looked after in those situations, paid reasonably, that there's choice in the matter, they use protection, that it's all open…as opposed to when women are drugged and abused in a situation. It's two very different kinds of pornography there' (19; also 23). Another interviewee raised the question of how one would tell if people were genuinely consenting, arguing that it is possible to read this from body language (29).

The idea of consent was also linked to the notion of pleasure, with interviewees arguing that non-consensual pornography was not only ethically wrong, it was also bad pornography, because not sexually engaging. They argued that only pornography where people are genuinely enjoying themselves is sexually arousing (30). This is discussed further in the section below on what makes good pornography.

In describing what is a problem in society, none of the interviewees argued that 'anything goes'. A second 'dominant discourse' presented in these interviews is that there is such a thing as unacceptable pornography—including examples such as that which involves children (2, 4, 8, 11, 13, 16, 17, 21, 22, 25, 28, 32, 36, 38, 44), 'rape', or 'violence' generally (1, 2, 4, 16, 18, 19, 23, 25, 27, 31, 35, 37, 44) and 'bestiality' (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 17, 18, 27, 28, 35). Some of the interviews said they disapproved of pornography that was 'abusive' or 'degrading' (16, 19, 31). One interviewee also singled out 'incest' in pornography (19) as a problem; and one singled out urophilia (22). Interviewees had not necessarily encountered anything like this—their positions on these issues were ethical ones, not based on their own personal experiences with such material. A few had seen bestiality (17) or violence (23), but another interviewee said that: 'I guess … violence would be a problem [in pornography] but I have never seen any … you see some spanking videos, but nothing you know, with a lot of force. But that's about as close to the violence that I've seen on video … wowsers and the Christian types they say it's [violent pornography] out there, so I guess it's out there

somewhere. But I've never seen it or come across it, and I've seen a lot of videos' (37). No interviewee had seen child pornography.

The interviewees were not simply paying lip service here to dominant social categories. One woman made clear that she acted on her ethical beliefs: 'I had a challenge when I worked at [a company], someone in IT there was downloading child pornography movies onto one of our servers, in IT, and they were caught and they managed to talk their way out of it to senior management. I would have thought that was not something you could talk your way out of saying "I didn't know what I was doing". And I just thought, "I can't talk to that person, they're a sick bastard and I'm going to make their life a misery". So I went to friends in the police who were in the child protection squad, and thought if management won't do something about it I will' (4).

A number of the interviewees—both women and men—argued that they thought that sadomasochistic fantasy violence was acceptable so long as it was clearly a consensual performance. As one woman put it: 'I think it's okay to act out something non-consensual—but if it really in reality is, then that's not okay' (2). As another woman puts it: 'when someone is role playing you know that it's a role play when you watch it' (4; also 10, 29, 30, 35, 37, 44). Generally interviewees were tolerant of sadomasochistic performance—although one argued that it might be harmful (27).

A common trope in public discussions of pornography is the idea that people start with softcore pornography, and then go down a slippery slope into harder material—including violent, bestial and child pornography. We have little knowledge about how people who consume pornography deal with material that they don't like. Do they tend to absorb whatever they are shown?

Our interviews suggest that pornographic consumers are in fact able to distinguish quite clearly between what they like and what they don't like—and that they have strategies in place to deal with situations where they might encounter unpleasant material. A third dominant discourse in the interviews is that the consumers of pornography believe that if you don't want to see something, you should not have to watch it. One woman told us that when she sees material she doesn't like: 'I turn it off, or I leave the room' (1). Another woman said that if she doesn't like somebody on the tape, she will: 'put something different on' (7). One woman said that if she feels

the women in a sex scene are being treated as sex objects then she'll 'fast forward through' (14). As she notes, 'Most people do that with anything they're watching don't they?' (14). A male interviewee told us that when he finds material he doesn't like he will: 'Bypass it or throw it away' or 'skip' it (22). Another told us that he 'chooses not to watch particular kinds of material (29); while another said that he avoids material he's not interested in, and: 'if someone tried to show me that I'd shy away from it' (30). Another said that if material is too extreme, then he will: 'reach for the remote and turn it off' (31; also 36). One straight man said that he didn't like seeing gay male sex, but if he did stumble across it then: 'I'll just laugh it off' (32).

Public debates about pornography

When asked whether they thought pornography was a problem in our society, several interviewees took the opportunity to talk about the way that minority groups tried to make it seem like a problem.

I could not identify a single simple 'dominant discourse' in answers to this question, although there was a general agreement about the theme that public discussion about pornography tended to involve unrepresentative voices. Several interviewees pointed out that media discussions of pornography tend to always focus on the negative: 'it's generally the nasty side, there's not the talk about nice sides … It's never really in a positive sense' (4; also 5, 13, 40). One woman noted that: 'I think there is too much focus on the *ab*normal person who takes pornography use too far and … uses pornography to shield their own violence or abnormal sexual behaviours. And I don't think the media focuses on … the fact that there are a *lot* of people who use porn and *don't* take it to that degree and use porn as a regular, normal and healthy part of their own sex lives' (12). Another interviewee similarly stated that: 'one of the problems is that people don't separate the issues that can occur in pornography, such as pedophilia—I don't know of anyone I've associated with who's ever been into that. And I don't know of anyone who has any time for or derives enjoyment from watching torture' (30). Another noted that: 'the only time I hear it or see it in the newspaper they take the extreme, like trannie sex or bondage stuff. They just head straight to the extreme stuff and then say that because of that they should ban everything' (37). Several interviewees explained this tendency as a generic

requirement of the news media: that they need sensational stories to get audiences: 'it's always sensationalised; otherwise they've got nothing to say' (18; also 21, 31, 40). As one interviewee puts it 'journalists … sensationalise everything … You watch porn and you turn into a fuckin' rapist … that's where their [journalist's] fuckin' money is' (40). One of the interviews noted that: 'I do think that it's put up as the scapegoat for a lot of problems … you'll see how men get arrested for other things and it's like, well he had a room full of pornography and I think that's completely irrelevant. You know, if he had a room full of butterfly collections it wouldn't get mentioned because they don't think it's relevant' (13).

One interviewee suggested that: 'I think small but vocal minority groups jump up and down and go "it's wrong, this is nasty, this is naughty" and get an awful lot of airplay and get an awful lot of media time and people get influenced by them then you get stuff being censored that wouldn't normally be censored … They say that they are representing Australian families but you don't represent me thank you very much' (3). Another agreed that: 'it seems to very much, sort of hijacked by religious sects … if you get any discussion about pornography it seems to be very much… family values stuff or the whole Christian sexuality stuff…' (16). Several respondents agreed that anti-pornographic feeling in Australia is fuelled by churches (25, 26, 29, 46). Conversely, two interviewees discussed their own religious beliefs and how they reconciled them with their interest in pornography: 'God gave us glorious gorgeous bodies and we should enjoy them. The pornography part probably doesn't relate too well with the whole religion thing but sometimes one just goes "okay, yeah, that's part of my life that doesn't really fit in with the whole religious part, nyeeah."' (3; also 21).

Several interviewees took a classic liberal line on this position. They argued that our society treats sex as being dirty and shameful (1, 12, 13, 44), and worried that this lead to 'hang ups' (4); and the possibility that: 'as long as we just throw it all to the side and say we don't want to talk to any of it, then we are going to have all these weird things because they exist in the shady environment that has no public scrutiny because the public just doesn't want to talk about it' (9; also 8, 12, 14).

The consumers we interviewed suggested that living in such a social context meant that 'people feel that they have to make it a secret' (13); that they are 'in the closet' (4) about the fact that they used sexually explicit material: 'Especially when you've

got fundamental born-again Christians that you have to work with … and people that … don't hold back on their inacceptance of your choices …You just think I wish I could be who I am [laughs]' (4). Another notes that it is hard: 'to come out and say "Yes, I advocate pornography" because that would make people think "eeeu, you're dirty"' (5). Another interviewee said: 'you look at the numbers of people who buy this stuff and the numbers of people who have seen porn or have used porn in their life, and I would say the majority of men out there, in particular. And yet at the same time, so they will use it in private but at the same time they will denounce it in public, as family men, and I just find the whole thing so hypocritical, and so harmful, that I would like to see a more honest approach to the whole thing' (9).

Perhaps because of this, many interviewees mentioned that they had formed social groups with like-minded people—I would identify the importance of communities of pornography consumers as a fourth 'dominant discourse' in the interviews analysed. Some of them noted that: 'it's an accepted part of my sort of social group' (4, 14), and that they tend not to be friends with people who would disapprove (4, 8, 12). Interviewees mentioned how they would discuss pornography with friends, swapping material, making recommendations and so on (8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 18, 24, 28, 32, 34, 40, 43): 'often you'd come up with something and you'd go, "hmm, this is really up your alley". The thing is, at least in my group of friends, that it's a very natural exchange, it's not awkward, it's like if you find a book someone would like or a TV programme you'd recommend to them, it's like anything' (12). Some also did this with their workmates (7, 27); or with family members (22, 26). Not everyone did this, though, and some kept their use of pornography from their friends: 'it's not the sort of thing that people are going to advertise … my flatmates—both engineers—in closed quarters we're inclined to chat about who's got what, that sort of thing, but I think there's a certain degree of perception of social adequacy that tells them that they shouldn't advertise what they like, what they think, what they've got' (20; also 19, 45).

Censorship

The issue of censorship, as with the issue of harmful pornography, was one where a small number of dominant discourses were presented consistently by interviewees.

According to the current legislation in Australia, it is technically illegal to sell X-rated material in any State—it can only legally be sold from the ACT and the NT. It is also illegal, anywhere in Australia, to sell videos that include any kinky sexual practices, such as spanking. A fifth 'dominant discourse' in these interviews was that the government was intruding too much into the individual lives of citizens. Several consumers made the point that as 'consenting' 'adults' (1, 3, 12, 41, 46) they should have the right to make the choice about what they view 'within my own home' (1; also 41). They argued that: 'I think that the government has too much say in what I want to see, you know I don't need to be spoon-fed or babysat and if I want to see it then that's my decision' (13). Another suggested that Australia is: 'now becoming a police state' (21). As one interviewee put it: 'Get the fuck out of our bedrooms' (29).

A common theme running through the comments of interviewees was a distrust of public officials and 'bloody politicians' (26). One argued that: 'there are not people on the censorship board looking at adult material who are either young, or sexually diverse or involved in the adult industry, in the sex industry … it's not a realistic cross-section of Australian society at all and so you've got conservative kinds of people who are always going to object, trying to tell people who are not like that what they want to watch, it's ridiculous' (12; also 13). Another said: 'who decides? Some guy in a suit in an office up in Canberra?' (25). Another interviewee made a similar point: 'you do get sort of offended by the fact that these people are making judgements … I mean, why don't they ring me up? I'll go up there and be a censor. It wouldn't worry me … it's like I said to my wife, where do these people get these qualifications from? What do I have to do to get that? Shouldn't I, as an avid watcher of DVDs and VCRs be as qualified as what they are? There are movies that I will not watch. I'll put them on, I'll just look at the quality, look at *one* scene and I'll be like "that's not good enough"' (22). Another interviewee argued that 'the government' uses censorship as a form of social control: 'I think a lot of that is politically driven' (29).

On the other hand, the interviewees did not argue that 'anything goes'. They were not anarchists. Several made this explicit: 'We need the police. The police are our saviour in Australia' (22). Another stated that: 'you've got to have a censorship system there … we need laws and regulations, people out there would be beating each other up, killing each other, doing whatever they want. There's got to be some restriction there

to keep society in place' (32). As one interviewee argued: 'I'm not saying there should be a free love, "let's talk about everything" sort of mentality, but there … should be … a middle ground' (40). Another insisted that: 'you don't want to encourage things that society sees as a whole as being outside of the common morals…a murder is a moral issue … we have set a moral boundary, which is probably still in the wrong spot, but you can't go too far in the opposite direction and lose all morals…for example, respect for property' (44).

Interviewees identified material that should be illegal in Australia. As with the discussion of harmful pornography described above, the key issue was non-consensuality: 'violent porn should be controlled. Child porn and bestiality and porn that is violent towards women' (27). Most of the interviewees were also happy with a system that prevents children from being able to access pornographic material—the argument that children should not have access to pornography was a sixth 'dominant discourse' in the interviews: 'obviously, it should be restricted for children, that's a given' (46; also 22, 24, 27, 28, 41). Some interviewees thought the appropriate age was 16 (2, 10, 23); others 18 (3, 7, 10, 34, 40, 46). These interviewees thought that for younger people: 'they might get the wrong idea and use it out of context … they might not know how to handle it' (10). One interviewee condemned companies who use pornographic pop-ups on computers: 'The problems I do have with pornography is when companies peddling it on the web have it set up in such a way so that once, shall we say, a father, aged over eighteen, mature and responsible, makes his own decision and looked at pornography, and the next thing you know anyone who opens the computer gets pornographic pop ups left right and centre. That's not good' (3). One interviewee was worried that children might be able to access pornography on the Internet (25). Responding to this issue, interviewees suggested that parents should use computer programs that limit access (10, 46).

Some interviewees pointed out that the current system of censorship doesn't actually stop children seeing pornography (as their own experiences of first encountering pornography, described above, suggest): 'kids have seen it anyway by the time they're 18 even though they're not technically supposed to buy it' (9; also 20). As another argued, drawing on his own experience: 'If you want to see something or you want something bad enough you're gonna get it, it's as simple as that. I remember when I was 14 and I remember the movie *Natural Born Killers*. I really wanted to see that. I

was 14 and there was no way I was going to be able to buy a ticket so me and my mate watch another movie, snuck in to watch that' (32). These interviewees suggested that restricting children's access to pornography is a good thing because it means that only those children who really want to see it will see it: 'It's good to have the restrictions there, some people have the initiative to try and look for a way around things' (32; also 24, 46). One interviewee argued that children generally are not actually interested in pornography: 'I don't think children are really interested … in adult behaviour … they might look at it, say well that's naughty, but beyond that it has no relevance to the child mind … There's no need to shove it under their noses, but if they see it accidentally, I don't believe that it hurts them' (36; also 15).

Commenting on the fact that the current censorship system prevents both the sale of any kinky material in Australia, and the sale of any sexually explicit material outside of the ACT and NT, interviewees made four critiques.

Firstly, a seventh 'dominant discourse' pointed out that there is a double standard in Australian censorship, where people—including children—are allowed to see violence, but not sex (1, 9, 14, 15, 25, 27, 29, 30). As one put it: 'I think it should be the amount of violence and blood and gore and anti social behaviour the higher the rating … Because I would much rather my children saw naked people than dead people' (8).

Secondly, the issue was raised that it is not fair on the majority of users of pornography that sexually explicit materials are restricted on the basis that a small number of mentally unwell people might react badly to them: 'It would be good to limit it [pornography] to people who were mentally stable and balanced, with a pretty valid view on society and women and men. Which is near impossible to restrict it to … I guess the government's attitude is if we can't regulate the people we'll regulate the content. But that's not fair for everyone' (5; also 7).

Thirdly, two interviewees complained about the fact that Bondage and Domination/Sadism and Masochism material (BDSM) has been made illegal in Australia (8). As one pointed out, the practices are legal—so why should videos of them be illegal? (38).

Fourthly, some interviewees argued that censoring material pushes it under the carpet and thus causes problems: 'it's not stopping people from being able to get a hold of

things it's simply making it something that they can't discuss in an open forum, and that's probably a negative effect' (20; also 40).

Protecting their own children

Several of the interviewees had children of their own. Although we did not ask them any questions about this, many of them spontaneously discussed their own children in relation to issues of censorship.

None of the interviewees said that they would let their children have free rein, and several spoke about their desire to stop their children seeing pornographic material: 'I wouldn't let my kids watch anything like that' (43; also 41). They argued that as parents, they felt it was their responsibility to ensure that their children did not encounter inappropriate material: 'Parents are the ones who have to do the censoring. And by doing that they have to educate their children before they hit that stage, on what's right and what's wrong' (46). One woman said that she made sure her daughter didn't find explicit material on the Internet: 'no-one wants to take responsibility for themselves, everybody wants to blame someone else and if your child accesses pornography, it's not the Internet's fault, or pornography's fault, I think it's your fault. You should make sure that you take the steps so that doesn't happen' (13).

The interviewees with children all had strategies in place to ensure the children didn't find their pornography. One woman explains: 'we have a rule where there is a time and place … If it's [pornography] going to be put on, it's going to be put on after they've gone to bed, and they don't get up. If my daughter gets up to go to the toilet, it's "Goodnight Elizabeth, go back to bed" …. Or else the TV gets turned off. You know, we can always rewind the video back' (17). Another male interviewee described a similar strategy: 'I got two sons … they are in and out of the room all the time. But we've got other TV rooms so they don't come into my room when they know there is a law. After 8 o'clock that's mum and dad's room and we sit there and relax … we've hidden them [pornographic tapes] and I've locked them up, they're all under lock and key and the kids have got no access because they don't know where the key is' (22; also 28).

One interviewee said that he has Net Nanny on his computer, and doesn't view Internet pornography: 'Because of my kids' (22). Another went so far as to say that: 'I won't let them [my kids] go on the Internet … I'm just too scared that it's [pornography] going to come up' (42). Taking an alternative approach, one woman explained that there was material she didn't want her daughter to see, and she discussed this with her: 'There are certain things I prefer her not to look at and I've said that to her and I've said … "I'd just rather you didn't look at this particular area yet" … And I haven't said she can't, I've said "I'd prefer you not to" and we talk about it on that level' (15).

The interviewees were happy that their children would make their own decisions about pornography when they grew up—'when they're ready' (3), or 'When he gets to 18 or 19' (22; also 42). One female interviewee said that she was going to use good pornography to make sure her son had a proper sex education, using the video *How to Make Love to a Woman*: 'a very, very good instructional DVD … When he's about sixteen we're accidentally going to leave it out' (3). Another woman made the same point: 'You can get great *Sex for Lovers* [tapes] … about couples wanting to improve their relationship and it's very open, and it's something even I would leave out for my children as they grow older to see … by the time they're sort of getting 16 and you know, they're out there with their mates and things like that, I think some of the porn gives them the wrong idea on how to treat women … So I would encourage them to look at some of these other more educational ones that talk about emotions and things like that, that are very important in a relationship' (7; also 15).

Conclusion

One of the contributors to the public debate about Clive Hamilton's proposal to censor the Internet in Australia claimed that the voices of pornography consumers should continue to be excluded from the public sphere: 'Academics would have us take the words of porn users as grounds to support purveyance of pornography. By the same token, let us survey drug addicts in order to justify the legislation of drugs, weapons manufacturers in order to justify war and gamblers in order to promote gambling' (Trad, 2004: 14). Such a dismissal of pornography consumers is common in public debates—but it relies for its force on the assumption that those consumers

are either mentally incompetent (addicted) or unethical. Hopefully the material presented in this article helps to show that neither of these is necessarily the case. Of course, some users of pornography may be addicted or unethical: but it is not a necessary condition of being a consumer of the genre. Consumers of pornography demonstrated in these interviews that they can present intelligent and ethical arguments around the genre. They made clear that just because they like some pornography does not mean that they like or approve of all pornography. In some ways their positions are similar to those of the majority of the populace—condemning non-consensual and violent pornography, child pornography and bestiality. This provides a useful perspective on a debate where arguments about the need to deal with such non-consensual material can too easily slide into arguments about censoring all sexually explicit materials. These consumers demonstrate that it is possible to be outraged by non-consensual materials, and also love consensual pornography.

The interviews give us an insight into the positions of pornography consumers. It is interesting that the arguments presented by the interviewees (eleven of whom were National-Liberal voters) are those of traditionally liberal politics—arguing for small government, a distrust of politicians, and the need to listen to ordinary people and not special interest minority groups (church voices) on these issues. Particularly surprising, given the insistent division in the public debate between concerned parents and pornography users, is the fact that several of the interviewees had children. From these interviews we see that they are not careless about the needs of children, but have in fact thought through these issues, have ethical positions on them, and have put strategies in place to ensure that their own children do not encounter the material.

These are only the voices of forty six self-selected consumers of pornography. But it tells us something about the history of the public debate on this issue in Australia that this is probably a larger number of consumers of pornography than have been given a voice in several years of public debate about the genre in the Australian media.

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Appendix 1

Questions for the semi-structured interviews.

1. How did you find out about the survey
2. Were you embarrassed to fill it in?
3. Look at survey answer about how much porn they use & quote it … do you think you use a lot of pornography?

   Look at survey answer as to whether partnered/single. Are you still single/in a relationship?

   If partnered … does your partner know that you use/use as much pornography?

   If they answer no … why do you feel like you should keep this from her?

   Do you use pornography together?
4. Do your friends know that you use pornography?

   If the answer is yes … do you exchange porn with them?

   Do you download/recommend movies for your friends?
5. Tell me about the first time you saw something pornographic … let them answer & if you don't have the information …

   Were you alone or with friends/partner?

   How old do you think you were?

   Do you think that seeing porn at that age harmed you in any way?

   Do you think that it shaped your expectations of what sexual partners want, or how they should behave sexually?

Do you think that it shaped your expectations about sex and love-making generally?

6. If your partner initiated watching/looking pornographic texts together would you be shocked?

   If yes, why?

7. Do you think that pornography is a problem in our society?

   If so why, and how?

   Do you think that it should be restricted?

8. What do you think about the way pornography is discussed in the media?

9. With regard to censorship, are you aware that it is illegal to sell (but not to buy) pornography outside of the ACT?

   Are you happy with that?

   Where do you buy yours?

   Do you think people should go to prison for selling porn, bearing in mind that it is illegal?

   It is also illegal to produce pornographic texts in this country … do you agree with that?

   Would you like to see more Australian pornography?

   If you had the choice, would you buy Australian or foreign-produced texts?

   Do you think that Australia should be allowed to produce its own movies?

   Why/not?

   Do you think the censorship system in Australia works well?

10. Is there anything that annoys you about the pornography that you buy?

11. What do you think makes for the best pornography?

Appendix 2: details of interviewees

Number	Age	Income (in $)	Education	Gender	Sexuality	Area	State	Religion
1	46-55	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Town	NSW	Methodist
2	26-35	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Other
3	36-45	Under 12,000	Still studying	Female	Bisexual	Small town	NSW	Anglican
4	36-45	60,001-80,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	NSW	Anglican
5	26-35	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Atheist
6	26-35	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Other Christian
7	36-45	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Other
8	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Rural	VIC	Atheist
9	19-25	20,001-30,000	Still studying	Female	Straight	City, urban	VIC	Atheist
10	Under 18	12,001-20,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	Rural	VIC	Anglican
11	19-25	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	QLD	Other
12	19-25	30,001-40,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	QLD	Atheist
13	36-45	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Town	QLD	Other

14	26-35	80,001-100,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, urban	QLD	Atheist
15	46-55	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
16	36-45	20,001-30,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
17	26-35	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Remote	TAS	Catholic
18	56-65	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
19	36-45	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Male	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
20	19-25	30,001-40,000	Still studying	Male	BDSM	City, urban	NSW	Other
21	66+	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Anglican
22	46-55	60,001-80,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Catholic
23	Under 18	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Other
24	19-25	Under 12,000	Still studying	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Atheist
25	19-25	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Anglican
26	66+	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Atheist
27	26-35	12,001-20,000	Still studying	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, urban	VIC	Anglican

28	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Anglican
29	46-55	60,001-80,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/ lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Atheist
30	66+	12,001-20,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/ lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Atheist
31	46-55	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/ lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Other
32	19-25	12,001-20,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	WA	No answer
33	56-65	20,001-30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, urban	TAS	Other Christian
34	19-25	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	TAS	Catholic
35	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	TAS	Atheist
36	66+	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	SA	Other
37	26-35	12,001-20,000	Still studying	Male	Celibate	City, suburban	SA	Atheist
38	26-35	40,001-60,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
39	26-35	20,001-30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
40	36-45	80,001-100,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NT	Other
41	26-35	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Rural	SA	Other

42	26-35	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	Rural	SA	Other
43	36-45	60,001-80,000	Secondary	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Catholic
44	36-45	60,001-80,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Catholic
45	36-45	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Rural	VIC	Other
46	36-45	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	BDSM	Rural	VIC	Other

[1] This survey is part of a three-year project entitled 'Understanding Pornography in Australia', funded by the Australian Research Council. The interviews could not have been completed without the wonderful work of the project manager Jenny Burton; and the interviewers around the country, Rosemary Cooper, Anne Fawcett, Nadia Mahjour, Pam Martin, Kimba Scorpecci, Jason Bainbridge, Terry Evans, Clifton Evers, Glen Fuller, Ryan Griffith, Cary Lee, Paul Levett, Colin Parton, and Dion de Wild.

[2] It is worth noting that although we were able to get a good mix of most demographic categories, we found that the educational level of those respondents who were willing to be interviewed was disproportionately high. It is possible that the process of being interviewed by academics is a classed experience—see Seiter, 1990.

[3] To describe this more technically, the decision was taken to use 'interview textual analysis'—see McKee, 2004: 5.

[4] To describe this latter point more technically, I performed an ‘exegesis’ of the interviewees’ comments.